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Implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Programme 2017

Note by the secretariat

Addendum

Report of the Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA)

Summary

The third Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) was held on 21-22 February 2018 in Geneva. The seminar was organised following a decision of the Conference of European Statisticians in June 2017.

The report is submitted to the Conference of European Statisticians for information.

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I. Introduction

1. The Joint OECD/UNECE Seminar on the Implementation of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) was held in Geneva on 21-22 February 2017. It was jointly organized with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and an organising committee with members from Australia, Canada, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Sweden and Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat).

2. Experts from the following countries attended the meeting: Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Mexico, Mongolia, Republic of Moldova, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

3. Representatives of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank, European Commission – Eurostat, European Environment Agency (EEA), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Asia Development Bank and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

4. The non-governmental organizations Cadaster Institute, Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC) and Zoi Environment Network were also represented at the meeting.

II. Organization of the seminar

5. The Seminar elected Mr. Gerard J. Eding (Statistics Netherlands) as its Chair. He will also serve as Chair of the Organising Committee of the Joint OECD/UNECE Seminars.

6. The participants adopted the agenda of the seminar.

7. The following substantive topics were discussed at the seminar:

   a) Session 1: National SEEA implementation plans;

   b) Session 2: Guidelines for SEEA implementation and new ways to generate data;

   c) Session 3: Coordination of capacity building activities;

   d) Session 4: Policy applications of SEEA;

   e) Session 5: Conclusions and recommendations for further work.

8. Session Chairs were Mr. Pierre-Alain Pionnier (OECD, session 1), Ms. Jacky Hodges (Australian Bureau of Statistics, session 2), Ms. Viveka Palm (Statistics Sweden, session 3), Mr. Gerard Eding (Statistics Netherlands, session 4) and Mr. Kevin Roberts (Statistics Canada, session 5).

III. Summary of the discussion and main conclusions reached at the meeting

A. Session 1: National SEEA implementation plans

9. The objectives of this session were to give an overview on the current status of SEEA implementation in the UNECE region and to identify the main implementation challenges. Furthermore, the session aimed to give recommendations to countries to establish a national implementation plan and to discuss possible solutions on how to overcome related obstacles.

10. OECD presented the status of SEEA implementation in the region based on the results of the *UNCEEA Global Assessment of Environmental-Economic Accounting and Supporting Statistics*, which was carried out in 2017. One of the main conclusions of the presentation was that reaching the global SEEA targets 2020 (100 countries with ongoing programs on SEEA Central Framework and 50 countries initiating work on SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting) is still challenging. It was also concluded that technical assistance provided to countries does not always materialise in the form of implementation plans. Lack of regular funding is often impeding SEEA implementation.

11. UNSD informed about the *SEEA implementation guide*[1], which provides a step-by-step guidance for the preparation of national SEEA implementation plans. The implementation guide proposes a stepwise approach, includes a diagnostic tool and recommends a structure for national implementation plans.

12. In a panel, experts from Australia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Mongolia discussed the main barriers for SEEA implementation, lessons learned from establishing national implementation plans, and priorities of work by 2020 and beyond.

13. The lack of underlying data was mentioned as one of the main obstacles by the four panellists representing EECCA countries. Interventions from the floor showed that this issue faced by environmental-economic accountants is very similar to the one faced by national accountants. The available data sources are rarely fit for purpose. Data first needs to be harmonised, which requires patience and sometimes creativity. Compiling environmental-economic accounts (or national accounts) from basic statistics was seen in analogy to assembling a puzzle.

14. Australia mentioned that even as a country with long experience in environmental-economic accounting it still has difficulties to find an audience among policy makers and in treasury departments.

Conclusions

15. According to the UNCEEA Global Assessment, lack of regular funding of environmental-economic accounting activities is one of the main obstacles to SEEA implementation. Participants also stressed that limited access to and the quality of underlying data are considerable problems for many NSOs. Strategic implementation plans, institutional mechanisms to bring together stakeholders (users and producers) and effective communication towards policy makers, researchers, users and journalists have a key role to ensure that SEEA is mainstreamed in the statistical production process and in the policy decision making process. Leadership by NSOs and the Heads of NSOs is crucial for the implementation of SEEA. Participants of the seminar recommended:

[1] SEEA implementation guide : https://unstats.un.org/unsd/envaccounting/ceea/meetings/ninth_meeting/UNCEEA-9-6d.pdf

a) National Chief Statisticians need to ensure that all stakeholders (from data providers to final users) are involved in the development of SEEA implementation plans, so that funding, access to data and policy relevance are secured;

b) Countries with less experience in environmental-economic accounting need to (1) be pragmatic (i.e. start with the easiest SEEA modules or those for which data availability is (relatively) good), learn by doing and release the results on an experimental basis to demonstrate the relevance of the work; and (2) take advantage of the momentum created by the Paris agreement and SDGs to ensure that funding and technical assistance is directed towards development of data that can be integrated with economic data using the SEEA framework;

c) Future seminars could further illustrate the usefulness of environmental-economic accounts for economic and environmental policies.

16. The SEEA implementation guide provides a good start to prepare national implementation plans. Countries are encouraged to identify existing national initiatives (e.g. SDG, climate change reporting, BIOFIN, etc.) which can use SEEA and the existing data sources to compile the accounts. There is a need to connect with the owners of source data to make them aware of the usefulness and importance of statistical standards, classifications and identifiers. New sources for populating SEEA accounting tables like satellite imagery or sensor data provide new options to answer policy questions, but expertise is needed to manipulate these data and bring them in line with statistical standards and classifications.

B. Session 2: Guidelines for SEEA implementation and new ways to generate data

17. The objectives of the session were to update participants on available technical guiding material and to present new and emerging ways of producing data for SEEA.

18. UNSD gave a presentation on internationally available resources for SEEA implementation, which include methodological documents, an e-learning platform, technical notes and technical recommendations in support of SEEA-EEA. The newly established SEEA website[2] provides the links to all these documents.

19. Eurostat informed about European resources for SEEA implementation, including maintaining communities of practicioners, handbooks and practical guides for the most relevant European accounts, training courses, compilation tools (such as the builder for energy flow accounts) and different types of technical assistance. These resources are available on the methodology website of Eurostat[3].

20. Mongolia presented its work on physical energy flow accounts and environmental taxes, which partly uses big data from electricity and heat distributors to fill information gaps.

21. Another example was given by Moldova on the experimental calculation of air emission accounts. The presentation showed how information gaps can be overcome by combining different data sources and developing a specific national approach to produce time series for this account.

22. At a panel, experts from Moldova, Mongolia, Eurostat, OECD, UNSD and an international consultant discussed restrictions and possible solutions for the use of data not originating from sample surveys (such as administrative data, registers or big data).

[2] https://seea.un.org/

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/environment/methodology

23. The panel agreed that not one size fits all and bringing the relevant people together is the first step for using the data. NSOs should not be afraid of using estimates and should publish them. This will generate interest and may lead to better available data in the long-term. Also the reduced reporting burden was used as an argument to recycle available administrative data. The major problems mentioned by the panellists are that the content of these data sources does not always match the statistical needs and that they often are not fully accessible. Compilers of environmental-economic accounts who are using this kind of data need specific subject matter knowledge to convert these data into statistics and accounts.

24. The panel saw a big potential in the use of big data for ecosystem accounts.

Conclusions

25. The discussions of the panel and from the audience were concluded by the session chair as follows:

a) Frameworks, general guidelines and case examples are important and useful, but the data sources used in each country can be different, depending on actual data availability;

b) Compilers of accounts need to be flexible and understand the country context;

c) NSOs should promote the use of statistical standards, classifications and identifiers for administrative data;

d) Innovations like satellite imagery and the use of sensor data provide new options to answer policy questions, but expertise is needed to convert these data into official statistics.

C. Session 3: Coordination of capacity building activities

26. The aim of this session was to contribute to the coordination of capacity building activities carried out by international organisations and National Statistical Offices of some countries.

27. UNSD gave an overview on capacity building activities as coordinated under the UN Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA). Capacity building is part of the UNCEEA work programme and coordinated by Statistics South Africa. One important outcome of this work are the results of an international coordination survey, which was carried out in June 2017 among international organizations. In addition UNCEEA is involved in the further development of compilation guidelines, e-learning tools, organisation of workshops and trainings in cooperation with the Regional Commissions and others, and projects aimed to build capacity for SEEA.

28. Statistics Canada presented the work program of the UNCEEA Working Group on Coordination. Three priorities have been identified for the 2018 workplan: 1) Creation and maintenance of a super calendar of SEEA-related events on the UNSD website; 2) Making SEEA training materials readily available, and where necessary, developing a quality assurance process to ensure that these materials are coherent with SEEA methodologies and concepts; and 3) Ensuring SEEA presence in relevant reporting initiatives such as on climate change and the SDG indicators.

29. At a panel providers and receivers of technical assistance from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, the Netherlands and Turkey discussed their experiences and lessons learned. The discussants concluded that successful and sustainable capacity development is

usually the result of (a) political will and (b) sustained engagement and projects between those who provide technical assistance and those who receive it.

Conclusions

30. The identified success factors for capacity development are:

a) Extensive training of staff.

b) Driving forces such as international requirements (e.g. accession to OECD and EU, data collection, etc.).

c) Involvement of ministries and users in SEEA. This makes SEEA well-known, creates curiosity and interest to continue statistical development and in turn generates support and funding.

d) Courageous management is also a success factor. It is important to involve sufficient staff for a resilient working environment. A co-operation has to be established between environmental-economic accountants, environment statisticians, national accountants and with line ministries.

e) Cooperation is important between organisations that 'own' relevant source data and organizations that have the responsibility for compiling SEEA accounts. Also close cooperation between relevant area specialists within the statistical office is essential.

31. The coordination of work between the international organisations is important to avoid duplication of work and ensure synergies. One objective of future seminars could be to find various collaboration partners for capacity development activities.

D. Session 4: Policy applications of SEEA

32. The session on applications of SEEA is a follow-up to a similar session of the 2016 seminar. Its goal was to give some good examples on the policy uses of SEEA. The session also discussed communication strategies in using the SEEA.

33. Presentation of national examples from Costa Rica, Denmark, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United Kingdom were given. Australia presented the UNCEEA communication strategy for the implementation of SEEA and the Word Bank informed about the main outcomes of the 2016 and 2017 Fora on Natural Capital Accounting for better policy.

Conclusions

34. Participants welcomed the discussion on policy applications of SEEA. Showing countries' experiences is useful and should continue in the future.

E. Session 5: Conclusions and recommendations for further work

35. The final session concluded the seminar and identified follow-up actions.

36. UNECE presented the results of a survey on the planning of future seminars which was carried out among seminar participants during the first 1.5 seminar days. The results were the basis for planning of future seminars.

37. Participants recommended to continue the organisation of "Joint OECD/UNECE Seminars on SEEA implementation" on an annual basis. The seminar should last for two

days and focus on strategic issues of interest for all countries in the region. Proposed topics for the next seminar are:

a) Using new techniques and data sources for compiling SEEA accounts;

b) Communication strategies and policy applications;

c) Challenges related to the implementation of selected accounts, such as air emission accounts, energy accounts, water accounts, environmental taxes and subsidies, and environmental protection expenditure accounts.

d) Coordination of work in the region.

38. Participants also recommended that future seminars will be informed about the revision process of the SEEA Experimental Ecosystem Accounting and other related developments.

39. Technical workshops should be organised back-to-back with the seminar where discussions could go more in-depth on a particular selected topic.

40. A short document[4] with the conclusions mentioned in the substantive sessions of this report was adopted by the participants at the end of the seminar.

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[4] http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.33/2018/mtg2/SEEA2018_Short_Report_v27022018.pdf